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House of Representatives

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OF NEW YORK

H.R. 1, the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in opposition to this bill. While I am a strong advocate of adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare, I oppose this bill because its meager prescription drug benefit is not enough to outweigh the danger to America of ending Medicare as we know it.

I voted for H.R. 1, the *Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act*, when it first passed the House of Representatives at 2:00 a.m. on June 27. I sought consensus with my colleagues -- Republicans and Democrats alike -- as I always attempt to do in this House. My actions are driven by policy and not by politics. On this issue just as on the other critical issues we face every day in this House, I put the peoples' interest before any party's interest. I voted for this bill in June, even though I believed that version was flawed, to move the process forward so that a House-Senate Conference Committee could perfect the legislation into a good, fair and workable bill.

The second reason I voted for the bill was because it included language that I drafted, that would fix a huge problem for my constituents in the 2nd District of New York -- the problem is Medicare HMO reimbursement disparities that have left Long Island seniors' with high premiums. The current structure of Medicare HMO reimbursements is unfair and does not reflect the true cost of health care on Long Island. My language fixed that.

But Mr. Speaker, I did not vote for this bill in June to destroy Medicare. I did not vote in June to drive the premiums of senior citizens soaring through the roof. I did not vote to cut services and coverage for our most vulnerable citizens.

Yet that is exactly what the House-Senate Conference, meeting in clandestine secrecy, has sent back to this body.

The legislation has not been perfected. On the contrary, the bill before us is ominous to the future of America' health covenant with our senior citizens. Its provision that forces Medicare to compete directly with private insurance plans in six experimental regions of this country is a huge first step toward the destruction, not the perfection, of the Medicare system. Mr. Speaker, we cannot make our senior citizens the guinea pigs of back room deals.

Mr. Speaker, I did not come to Congress to privatize Medicare. I did not come to Congress to destroy Medicare. And therefore I cannot vote for this Republican bill that will enrich special interests at the expense of our most precious citizens -- our most venerable generation.

I am also disheartened about the reimportation provision that will allow drug prices in America to continue to soar unchecked. Many of my constituents, as many of yours, are forced to travel to Canada, or fill their prescriptions in Canada, where prices are often one-quarter of those in the United States. This House voted overwhelmingly for the safe, legal, affordable reimportation of medicine from Canada. The Conference Report has gutted that provision, making it all but meaningless. The Republican Conference Committee has put the profits of its drug company benefactors ahead of the welfare of the people of the United States. It is unconscionable.

We have also missed a golden opportunity to ensure that seniors have access to affordable drugs. The Conference Report before us explicitly prohibits the Secretary of Health and Human Services from negotiating lower drug prices on behalf of America's 41 million Medicare beneficiaries. Why, Mr. Speaker? Why does our government not seek to get our citizens the best products at the lowest prices? Once again, it seems this Republican bill sold-out the interests of our senior citizens for higher profits of US pharmaceutical companies.

Mr. Speaker, this bill will hurt -- not help -- Long Island seniors. The legislation contains a huge coverage gap for seniors who spend more than \$190 per month on medications. Seniors will only be eligible for drug coverage through private insurance companies that will have enormous discretion in setting premiums and deductibles. These private insurance companies will be able to decide which drugs are covered, as well as which pharmacies seniors can use. It takes choice away from our seniors, and gives it to drug companies and private insurance plans who consistently have put profits before people.

We could have done better, much better. Congressional negotiators could have come up with a compromise, consensus bill that moderate Democrats and Republicans could embrace. Unfortunately, the Conferees chose a different route. That is why I believe Congress must go back to the drawing board. Let us adopt a bill that protects, not subverts Medicare. Let us adopt a bill that provides for a meaningful prescription benefit for our seniors -- maximum coverage of prescriptions with the lowest possible prices for drugs. Only five months ago I voted for a bill that I hoped would lead us to such legislation. But what is before us tonight is a mockery of that wish for bipartisan consensus.

Our government has a sacred covenant with our senior citizens. The name of that sacred covenant is Medicare. This bill privatizes Medicare. This bill will destroy Medicare. This bill should not become law.